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CANNIBALISM IN NORTH AMERICA

Little attention has been given, either by scientists or historians, to the evidence for the existence of cannibalism among the native tribes of North America. Yet the fact, not only of its existence but of its recent existence, rests upon abundant historic and archæological proof. The Jesuit Fathers who explored Canada, the early voyagers in the West Indies, the first visitors of the Pacific coast, as well as the conquerors of Mexico, all unite in giving the most explicit testimony to the existence of aboriginal man-eating tribes. Brébeuf, who came from France as a missionary to this country in the early part of the seventeenth century, gives in his report for 1636 an account of the fate of certain prisoners taken by the Hurons. After describing the torture, he goes on to say that "if the victim has shown courage, the heart was first roasted, cut into small pieces, and given to the young men and boys to increase their courage. The body was then divided, thrown into kettles, and eaten by the assembly—the head being the portion for the chief. Many of the Hurons joined in the feast with reluctance and horror, while others took pleasure in it."^{*} Father Hennepin, writing forty years later, also speaks of the Hurons as practicing cannibalism.

The most powerful and cruel of the Northern tribes was the Iroquois; and all testimony seems to prove that it was most addicted to the habit of eating human flesh. The Jesuit missionaries were in many cases eye-witnesses of the orgies of this people. One of their feasts, celebrating a victory over the Algonquins, is thus described by Vimont: "Some bring wood, others go in search of water, and one puts the great kettles on the fire. The butchery is near. They dismember those they are going to kill, tearing them in pieces, throwing feet and legs, arms and heads, in the pot, which they boil with as much joy as the poor captives have heart-ache in seeing their companions served as a meal to these wolves. * * * * In a word, they eat the men with as great an appetite and more joy than hunters eat a boar or a deer."[†]

From the evidence we possess, it appears that no tribe delighted more in human flesh as a staple article of food than the Caribs, inhabitants of one of the West Indian Islands. Peter Martyr, who visited the New World a few

^{*} *Relations de la Nouvelle France en l'Année 1636*, p. 121.

[†] *Relations de la Nouvelle France en l'Année 1642*, par Vimont, p. 46.

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years after its discovery by Columbus, gives a full account of their practice. He does not seem himself to have witnessed one of their feasts, but takes the word of other explorers who had suffered from these cannibals. "The wild and mischievous people," he writes, "called cannibals, or Caribs, accustomed to eat men's flesh (and called by the old writers *anthropophagi*), molest them (the explorers) exceedingly, invading their country, taking them captive, killing and eating them * * * * *. Such children as they take they geld to make them fat, as we do cock chickens and young hogs, and eat them when they are well fed. Of such as they eat, they eat first the entrails and extreme parts, as hands, feet, arms, neck, and head. The other most fleshy parts they preserve in store as we do bacon. Yet do they abstain from eating women, and count it vile." *

The first visitors to the Pacific coast also found tribes of man-eaters. Cook says that, upon his landing, the Nootka tribe of Columbian Indians brought to him for sale human skulls and hands not quite stripped of their flesh, which they made him understand they had eaten. Some of the bones also bore marks of having been on the fire.[†] Bancroft, in his *Native Races of the Pacific Coast*, cites other evidence in the same line. Coke speaks of one of the most degraded tribes of Snake Indians eating dead bodies and killing their children for food.[‡]

The aborigines of Mexico and Central America were far less barbarous than the natives of other parts of North America. While, therefore, cannibalism existed among them, it took the form of a religious ceremony. Prescott asserts, on the authority of the Spaniards, that the Mexicans were not cannibals in the coarsest acceptance of the term. They did not feed on human flesh merely to gratify a brutish appetite, but in obedience to their religion. Their repasts were made of victims whose blood had been poured out on the altar of sacrifice.[§] A similar statement is made regarding the Itzas of Central America.

Among the New Mexican Indians the case was different. While tribes differed among themselves in regard to this practice, with many human flesh was sought as food. Incredible as it may seem, at least one tribe of Indians inhabiting Texas has practiced cannibalism within twenty-five years. Mr. J. G. Walker, formerly a member of the United States Army, and now a resident of Mexico, in a private letter to the author gives the following interesting facts:

* Peter Martyr's *De Rebus Oceanicis et Orbe Novo* Decades. First Decade.

† Cook's *Voyages to the Pacific*. Vol. II. p. 271.

‡ Coke's *Rocky Mountains*, p. 275.

§ *Conquest of Mexico*. 8th Ed. p. 84.

"The early American settlers on Matagorda Bay were greatly harassed by a tribe of Indians, called *Carrinkowas*, inhabiting the bay shore, and subsisting chiefly on fish and oysters. But they were known to have a keen relish for human flesh, which they sometimes added to their ordinary menu. In 1834-5 the custom was, however, becoming obsolete, and about that time was wholly abolished by the reigning chief. But there was a cognate tribe, a remnant of which still exists, which practiced cannibalism as late, certainly, as 1854. At that time I was an officer in the United States Army, and stationed at Fort Inge, in Texas. The *Tonkows*, the tribe to which I allude, being on good terms with the whites, were allowed to roam about Western Texas, and in the summer of 1854 were camping on the Nueces River, a few miles from the fort. I was frequently at their village, and on one occasion, when encamped with a party of soldiers not far off, a returning war-party of the tribe brought in the remains of a *Comanche* whom they had slain, and the night was made hideous, in a double sense, by the orgies that followed. During the night the entire remains were eaten, principally by the warriors. I do not think that the eating of human flesh was often practiced by them at this time, and even on this occasion it may have been done more as an expression of exultation over a fallen enemy than for the mere satisfying of hunger. But these Indians afterwards confessed to me that formerly their tribe habitually fed on human flesh when they could obtain the bodies of their enemies.

"It seems inconsistent with the facts I have just stated, but it is nevertheless true, that these semi-cannibals were less fierce and blood-thirsty than most of the other wild Indians. They were always on good terms with the settlers, and made common cause with them against the *Comanches*, *Kiowas*, and other predatory tribes on the northern border of the State. * * * I have often heard from participants in some of these engagements that it was the invariable custom of their *Tonkowa* allies to have a feast of roasted *Comanche* after their battles."

The evidence for the practice of cannibalism in America furnished by archæology is somewhat less conclusive than that which history presents. Bones, supposed to be the remains of the feasts on human flesh, are found in but few places; and even when found, other hypotheses than that of cannibalism may be offered to explain their presence. The recitals of eye-witnesses of these horrid orgies, from which we have abundantly quoted, have a value as evidence which the discovery of human bones, however irregular their position, peculiar their fracture, or large their accumulation, cannot possess. Yet the evidence offered by archæologists is of much worth.

The most important testimony is that of the late Professor Jeffries Wyman, from whom a more competent authority it would be difficult to name. As early as 1861, Professor Wyman began an examination of the shell heaps on the St. John's River, in Florida. After repeated examinations of the more important collections, he came to the conclusion that the remains found in them prove, so far as archaeology can prove, that the ancient dwellers on the St. John's were cannibals. After describing minutely the position of the bones unearthed, he suggests the reasons leading him to this decision. We cannot do better than to cite these four reasons in brief:

1. The bones were not deposited there at an ordinary burial of a dead body. In this case, after the decay of the flesh, there would have remained a certain order in the position of the parts of the skeleton. The bones would be entire, as in other burials. In the cases here described they were, on the contrary, scattered in a disorderly manner, broken into many fragments, and often some important portions were missing. The fractures, as well as the disorder in which the bones were found, evidently existed at the time they were covered up, as is shown by the condition of the broken ends, which had the same discoloration as the natural surfaces.

2. The bones were broken as in the case of edible animals, as the deer and the alligator. This would be necessary to reduce the parts to a size corresponding with the vessels in which they were cooked.

3. The breaking up of the bones had a certain amount of method: the heads of the humerus and femur were detached, as if to avoid the trouble, or from ignorance as to the way, of disarticulating the joints. The shafts of these bones, as also those of the fore-arm and leg, were regularly broken through the middle.

4. There is no evidence that the bones were broken up, while lying exposed upon the ground, by wild animals, as the wolves and bears. If they were thus broken, one might reasonably expect to find the marks of teeth, but after a careful examination of hundreds of pieces, they have not been seen in a single instance.

It has been suggested that the quantity of the bones may be explained without regarding them as remains of human feasts. When the French first came to America it is known that many of the natives had the custom of dismembering their fallen enemies and bearing away their limbs and scalps as trophies. "While such a custom," Professor Wyman remarks, "might account for the presence of human bones in the shell heaps, it would not for the fragmentary condition in which these are found, nor

for the systematic manner in which all the bones of the limbs as well as of the other parts of the skeleton are broken up." *

The chief evidence furnished by archæology of the custom of eating human flesh among the aborigines of New England has lately been presented by Mr. Manly Hardy, of Brewer, Maine. It is founded upon his own investigations into certain shell heaps of the coast of Penobscot Bay. Of these investigations he thus writes to the Peabody Museum of Cambridge:

"After digging some twenty feet horizontally, I found a human bone, a femur, and near by some twenty or thirty more bones of legs and arms, sternum, and portions of a pelvis, but no vertebræ or ribs. The long bones nearly all lay in a slanting position, many of them broken, and the corresponding parts either missing or not near enough to them to be indentified as belonging together. They had no more apparent connection with each other, as the bones of skeletons, than any heap of bones among kitchen refuse would have, and were mixed with bones of moose and beaver, whose teeth were found in considerable numbers, and were mixed with ashes and remains of fires.

"Below all these I came to a lower human jaw lying upon the top of a skull. The jaw was lying teeth side up, but contained but one tooth. In working carefully round the skull, which was placed crown up, I found another skull laid upon its side with the part which joined the neck pressed so close to the first that a knife blade could hardly be placed between them; on taking them out, the jaw fitted to the one on which it lay, and this had but one tooth in the upper jaw. The under skull was without a lower jaw, neither could I find any near it. This skull had nine teeth in the upper jaw. These skulls rested on virgin, yellow earth, which showed no traces of fire, or of ever being disturbed. A piece of granite projected on one side of the upright skull, and the skull was hard against it. The second skull touched this on one side, and on the other was another rock, the two skulls being so closely wedged between the rocks that it was very difficult to remove them. Above them on one side I saw several more bones projecting from the shells; but not having time for more extended search I carefully reinterred all the bones exhumed except the skulls and the bones sent you with them as specimens."

These investigations do not prove that the presence and position of the bones so found are the result of cannibalistic practices. But they do offer presumptive evidence that the shell-heap people of New England

* Seventh Annual Report of Peabody Museum, p. 32, note.

were addicted to the eating of human flesh, as certainly were the races of the same age on the St. John's, and as were several of the native Indian tribes of the North, of the Pacific coast, of Mexico, and of Central America.

It is clear that the motives leading different races into the custom of devouring human flesh were different. With some it was eaten as food; with some it was eaten as part of a religious ceremony; with others it was eaten by reason of superstition; and with yet others it was eaten as an act of vengeance to a fallen foe.

The practice of eating human flesh as food may have had its origin in necessity. Eaten to prevent starvation, and found to be good (as cannibals affirm it is), it may have come to be regarded as one of the regular foods. Bancroft asserts that though certain tribes of New Mexico abominated human flesh, others hunted it as game.* Yet the custom is more usual among cannibals who use only prisoners of war for food. In the *Relations of the Jesuits*, from which abundant quotations have been made, it is made clear that the Iroquois and other tribes devoured only enemies captured in battle.

The religious idea in cannibalism was most prominent among the native Mexicans. Their historian affirms that they did not feed on human flesh merely to gratify appetite, but in obedience to their religion. Bancroft acknowledges "that it is difficult to determine what religious ideas were connected with the almost universal practice of anthropophagy. Whatever may have been the original significance of the rite, it is most probable that finally the body, the essence of which (the blood poured out upon the altar) served to regale the god, was merely regarded as the remains of a divine feast, and was therefore sacred food."† The religious motive seems to have influenced the inhabitants of Nicaragua, and, indeed, many of the Maya natives, to make a food of human flesh. The priest dismembered the body, gave the heart to the high-priest, the feet and hands to the king, the thighs to those who had captured the prisoner, the entrails to the trumpeters, and the remainder to the people.

Connected with the religious motive in cannibalism is that represented by the general term superstition. The idea was common that by devouring the flesh of a fallen foe, and by drinking his blood, the eater became possessed of his bravery. A Nootka prince told the Spaniards that the bravest captains ate human flesh before going into battle. The Hyperboreans of the Pacific coast thought that by eating their prisoners taken in

* *Native Races of the Pacific Const.*, i. pp. 560, 575, 581.

† Bancroft's *Native Races*, iii. pp. 443-4.

- war they gained new strength and energy. It was the same superstitious motive that led the warrior to eat the body of his enemy and drink his blood warm.

Vengeance, also, not infrequently suggested the eating of the body of a foe who had been a terror to his destroyer. Thus the destroyer, so far as he thought possible, annihilated his enemy. The Hurons in their horrid orgies thus wreaked vengeance on the braves whom they had vanquished. It is not improbable that among many races these four motives,—human flesh eaten for food, as a religious rite, from superstition, and for vengeance,—were mingled in the practice of eating human flesh. Having its origin, perhaps, in a single one of these ideas, the custom gradually suggested other reasons for its continuance.

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